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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000653

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/11/2018  
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER CO VE  
SUBJECT: THE COLOMBIAN PATIENT - DISCHARGED?

REF: A. CARACAS 379  
¶B. CARACAS 349

Classified By: Daniel Lawton, Acting Political Counselor,  
for Reasons 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Local news services reported May 7 that FARC fighters Freddy Martinez Mendoza, a member of the 38th Front's General Staff and his companion Jose Ortiz Barrera, wanted in Colombia on charges of rebellion, had been quietly given conditional release on their own recognizance from their respective Venezuelan hospital bed and prison cell. Venezuelan military officials ostensibly responsible for the whereabouts of Martinez and Ortiz either disavowed any knowledge or were unavailable for comment. This will only deepen concern over the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (BRV) relationship with the FARC. Colombian Defense Minister Santos had stated on March 13 that the GOC awaited the hand over of the suspected rebels. END SUMMARY.

HMO TO THE FARC

¶2. (SBU) Ortiz escorted Martinez, who had a severely infected jaw wound, to a private medical clinic in the western Venezuelan state of Tachira on March 8 using Venezuelan aliases. By March 11 the two FARC fighters had been transferred under armed escort to the military garrison and hospital in Tachira's capital San Cristobal. (Ref B) Following the March 14 revelation by Colombia that the two men were Colombian FARC fighters Martinez and Ortiz, instead of the rumored FARC secretariat member Milton Jesus Toncel, (Ref. A) media interest quickly died off. On April 23 the regional paper reported that Martinez was still recuperating in the San Cristobal Military hospital. The report added that weeks earlier Martinez was sent to the Santa Teresa medical center for tests and the installation of a feeding tube.

SLIP OUT THE BACK, JACK

¶3. (SBU) La Nacion reported May 7 that Martinez was no longer in his semi-private hospital room and Ortiz was missing from his cell at the Western Penitentiary Center in Santa Ana. According to the paper's anonymous sources, the two men had been released on April 30. The San Cristobal garrison's commanding general, the director of the military hospital and the operational theater commander were all unavailable for comment. The Commanding General of the Guardian Nacional's first corps claimed no knowledge of what happened. El Nacional, one of the two most influential independent dailies, reported that Martinez and Ortiz were arraigned on the charge of possession of false documents at the first circuit court of Tachira and released on their own recognizance by provisional judge Ramon Quintero. In accordance with Venezuelan jurisprudence, the two must appear before the court every 15 days.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: According to local polling, eighty per cent of Venezuelans are uncomfortable with Chavez' sympathy for the FARC. Nevertheless, the fact that Martinez and Ortiz are not senior FARC leaders is likely to keep this story from gaining much traction in local media.

DUDDY